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SUBJECT: SERBIA'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: TOO CLOSE TO CALL

REF: A) BELGRADE 50, B) BELGRADE 22

Summary

1. (SBU) Democratic Party candidate for reelection, President Boris Tadic, faces stiff competition from Radical contender Tomislav Nikolic in Serbia's January 20 presidential elections, and Tadic is losing ground. Nikolic's slick campaign reinvented the candidate as a kind, trustworthy grandfather, while Tadic's lackluster performances have failed to overcome an apathetic electorate's disappointment with his leadership and Serbian politics in general. Spin doctors have collapsed the differences in the Democratic and Radical Party platforms, and the deciding issue will be voters' perceptions about the economy. Tadic and Nikolic will emerge from the field of nine going into the January 20 first round, with Nikolic ahead, and the two will run neck-and-neck in a February run-off. Sprinting toward round two, Tadic must pick up the pace and a lot of votes. He will need to change either his image or Nikolic's, or both, to win. End Summary.

Polling Data: A Race for Third Place

2. (U) Serbia's pollsters and gambling establishments all show Nikolic beating Tadic in the first round. Polls vary, but consistently put the leads within four points of each other. Gallup International's polling data released January 15 show Tadic trailing Nikolic 34.6% to 38.7%; and the daily journal Presse puts Nikolic at 36.1% to Tadic's 33.2% (source of data unknown). The International Republican Institute's tracking poll (data as of January 15) has Nikolic with 29%, to Tadic's 27%. Polls and media variously place Socialist Party candidate Milutin Mrkonjic, Liberal Democrat Cedimir (Ceda) Jovanovic, and New Serbia's Velimir Ilc in third place, with all three parties dividing about 23% of the vote.

Nikolic: What You See Is NOT What You Get

3. (U) What Serbian viewers see on the television ads and stumping around the country is a kindly, elderly Nikolic, walking hand-in-hand with his young grandson toward Serbia's soft-focus future. A calm, articulate Nikolic muses in on-camera interviews about job-creation and economic growth. In the run-up to the election, he even confusingly stole Tadic's plank and maintained support for Serbia's entry into the European Union.

4. (U) Nikolic's make-over has altered his style, delivery, and platform. What you no longer see is the spokesman of the xenophobic ultra-nationalist Radical Party. What you do not see (because no station would carry it) is a Vojvodina Social Democratic League's TV spot that links Nikolic to some of SRS Party and spiritual leader Vojislav Seselj's most notorious acts, with footage of police aiming firearms at demonstrating students and soldiers marching against Kosovo. What you do not hear (that you did hear during Nikolic's 2004 run for president) are calls for the expulsion of all ethnic Albanians from Kosovo and for joining the Krajina (Croatia) and

Republika Srpska to Serbia. Gone is the dry speaker of the 2004 campaign, whose range was monotonous and matter-of-fact even when delivering chilling messages. During this campaign, unlike the last, Nikolic has refrained from openly expressing his dislike of Croats and journalists. While he still opposes cooperation with the Hague Tribunal, he has not (as he did in 2003) called those who disagreed with him "unpatriotic." He continues to oppose Kosovo independence (as do all candidates running except Cedomir Jovanovic), but he publicly stated that he would not go to war over Kosovo.

15. (U) The made-over Nikolic appeals to a broad spectrum of Serbian society. Political analyst and former journalist Dragan Stojkovic divides Nikolic supporters into three demographics:

- older voters, many of whom fell through the cracks in Serbia's political/economic transition and who nostalgically identify in Nikolic "real Serbian values" and hope he will restore the Serbia of their youth; (It is noteworthy that in a June 2007 poll, 56% of respondents across all age groups described societal conditions, in general, as "hardly bearable" or "unbearable.")
- middle-aged voters with young families, who believe the Radical promises of a better standard of living and who are frustrated with Tadic's failure to tackle corruption; and
- the "turbo-folk," sanctions generation, raised on the image of murdered paramilitary leader Arkan as a Serbian Che Gueverra, and a diet of conspiracy theories, who want Serbia to be tough and life to be easy. (Note: turbo folk describes a popular, vaguely folkloric music characterized often by vulgar lyrics, a disco beat, and performed with a chorus line of dancers/cheerleaders.)

16. (U) A glance at popular blogs suggest that Nikolic's young supporters are not fooled by their candidate's kinder, softer image

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and look to him to keep Serbia safe from the West. The Serbian Radical Forum, a Radical internet blog, discourages "non-believers" from logging on. If an internet user who previously logged into the forum of B92 (a news media outlet) tries to access the Serbian Radical Forum a pop-up displays a swastika and a message appears that says, "You are a fascist Serbian hater coming from B-92. **** off to the place you come from."

Tadic: Disappointed Democrats

17. (U) Tadic supporters lack the Radicals' fervor -- for better and for worse. Democrats historically manifest their apathy and/or confidence in their low voter turnout. While pollsters estimate that potential Tadic supporters out-number Radicals more than 3 to 2, the Radicals are historically far better at turning out the vote. In the 2004 presidential elections, for example, Nikolic won 1.4 million votes, or over 90% of the Radicals' known universe. The Democrats, in contrast, turned out approximately 1.7 million, or about 70% of their upper limit. The Democratic Party campaign has so far failed to overcome voter apathy.

Voter Apathy

18. (U) On a visit to Novi Sad in multi-ethnic Vojvodina on January 17, poloff spoke with young people around the city regarding their plans for election day. Their frustration was telling. A marketing student visiting the American Corner said he believed Serbia would have no future until the country resolved Kosovo status and forged stronger ties with the United States, which he hoped to visit some day. The student said that no current politician was able to accomplish these goals, and he would, therefore, stay home from the polls. Another young man, working at a bookstore in the city's pedestrian zone said he realized that Serbia faced many issues vital to the country's future, but he did not see who would resolve those problems. Another young man, attending a discussion on hate speech at the Independent Journalist's Association, said he would vote for Tadic, but most of his friends were disappointed by Tadic and did

not know how they could change their own future. They did not want the status quo, and they did not want Nikolic, so they would stay home on election day.

Campaigning on Europe

¶9. (U) Tadic is running on Serbia's European future and credits his leadership for getting the country close to membership in the European Union. IRI Focus groups rank Tadic high on maintaining peace and stability, improving Serbia's position in Europe, and increasing investment and these indicators have clearly informed Tadic's speech writers. But the message is unclear. Nenad Canak, President of the League of Vojvodina Social Democrats, told poloff on January 17 that Tadic would have difficulty attracting young, educated, urban voters in the first round. Such voters were likely to stay home from the polls, because they did not agree with Nikolic's ideals, but Tadic did not present any real alternative. Many of these individuals had voted for Tadic before and did not see real improvement in conditions in Serbia. His campaign platform consisted of a "foggy story about the EU and a completely not understandable story about NATO." Voters were not certain what EU integration meant, and there was no popular support for NATO, due to lingering memories of the 1999 bombing campaign against Milosevic.

Prospect of Prosperity; It's the Economy, ...

¶10. (U) Although Serbia's President has no direct authority over Serbia's economy, economic concerns weigh heavily on the electorate, and IRI's December focus groups identified the economy as the deciding issue in the campaign. Throughout the campaign, newspaper headlines featured stories about corruption, tycoons, privatization of Serbia's energy assets and airline to Russia, and rising inflation.

¶11. (U) While Tadic might rightly claim that his image and leadership inspires Europe's and investors' confidence, his campaign has failed to deliver this message. (Avoiding negative campaigning, Tadic has not mentioned that the stock market dropped about 30% following Nikolic's election to Parliament Speaker in the summer of 2007, for example.) Instead, suffering an incumbent's disadvantage, focus groups hold Tadic responsible for Serbia not having recovered Yugoslavia's pre-breakup status quo ante and its leadership in the Balkans. The common refrain emboffs hear from random, albeit anecdotal, questioning of taxi drivers, shop keepers, and the man-on-the-street is that they lived better under Tito and Milosevic. Pollsters tell us that focus groups give Tadic middling or poor marks in response to questions on honesty and corruption and random man-on-the-street interlocutors' most common refrain is that Tadic allowed the "tycoons" to rob Serbia.

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Reaching the Undecided...In the Style of ????

¶12. (U) Tadic's campaign and especially his television spots depict the President energetically rallying crowds from behind a podium on a bare stage. Observers have described the arm-waving, triumphant image as reminiscent of Mussolini. On the plus side, Tadic's handlers show signs of tackling the apathetic faithful and even of expanding Tadic's base. In Belgrade, the evening of January 18, during Tadic's final rally before the campaign blackout, Republika Srpska Prime Minister Milorad Dodik took the stage to endorse Tadic.

Dodik's message, a DS member of parliament suggested, reached out to the undecided and aimed to discourage the community of Serb displaced from Croatia and from Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s from voting for "the Radicals that helped put them in the unfortunate position" of refugees.

Reaching the Other Democrats

¶13. (SBU) Two smaller democratic parties have already given Tadic the nod. At the January 12 Sandzak Democratic Party (SDP) conference, a coalition partner, SDP party leader and government minister Rasim Ljajic gave his strong support to Tadic. SDP is a regional party popular among predominantly Bosnian voters. SDP has publicly claimed that it generated 50,000 votes in the January 2007 elections, though others believe 30,000-35,000 may be more accurate.

Tadic spoke to the 1,000 attendees, stressing his commitment to all ethnic groups in Serbia. Nenad Canak, leader of the League of Vojvodina Social Democrats also endorsed Tadic for the first time at the SDP conference. Canak later told a smaller group that had leant party support to Tadic having recognized that the election would be so tight race. With DS and SRS polling 37% in one poll, Tadic said, "We are at our strongest, but so are they," he said.

Hungarian Leader to Support Tadic in Round 2

¶14. (SBU) Istvan Pasztor, head of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, an LDP coalition partner in Vojvodina, at his Belgrade rally on January 14 told poloff that his campaign was going well. He said that his candidacy united the various Hungarian parties and provided an opportunity to publicize the concerns of minorities in Serbia. Pasztor's campaign is for Euro-Atlantic integration, cooperation with the Hague Tribunal, and Kosovo independence. His platform also addresses the concerns of minorities and the need for increased autonomy of Vojvodina and a more decentralized state. Pasztor said he would be very satisfied to win 80,000 votes. He said that in the second round he would support whichever democratic candidate accepted his platform, most likely Democratic Party candidate, Serbian president Boris Tadic.

Ceda: Different from all the Rest

¶15. (U) LDP's final campaign rally in Belgrade on January 14 attracted 5,000 mostly young people. Most prominent leaders of LDP and its parliamentary coalition leaders were present, as were personalities popular with the young, including dramatist Biljana Srbljanovic, movie director Milutin Petrovic, and Vladimir Beba Popovic, a former confidant of Djindjic. Ceda has run in opposition to Tadic, maintaining that the president has accomplished little to bring into Europe and criticizing Tadic for acquiescing to Kostunica. Demonstrating his acceptance of Kosovo independence, Ceda rallied the Belgrade crowd by paraphrasing President Kennedy's Berlin speech. "I'm a citizen of Pristina, I'm an Albanian," he said.

Other Election News:

U.S. and UK Denied Observer Status

¶16. (U) The Republican Election Commission (RIK) continues to flout the rule of law by refusing on January 11 to issue election observer credentials to U.S. and UK embassy personnel. On January 16, Serbia's Speaker of Parliament, Oliver Dulic, sent both embassies personal letters endorsing the Supreme Court decision and apologizing for the RIK decision. (Text follows.) However, on January 18 the RIK once again voted (14-10) against accreditation. The vote was along party lines with the SRS, SPS, DSS, and Reformist party opposing accreditation and the DS, LDP and G17 for U.S. and UK credentialing. (Post intends to send out reporting teams throughout Serbia to cover the first round of the elections, but will observe rules governing approaching polling stations.)

Text of Letter Dated January 16, 2008, from Parliament Speaker Oliver Dulic to Ambassador.

¶17. (U) /Begin Text/

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Your Excellency,

I am witting to inform you that the Supreme Court of Serbia has made

a ruling which annulled the formal Decision of the Republic Electoral Commission according to which the Embassy of the United Kingdom and the Embassy of the United States of America have not been granted with the permission to observe the elections for the President of Serbia.

I hereby express my sincere apology for the decision made by the Republic Electoral Commission which could have had manifold harmful consequences.

I would also like you to note that pursuant to my legal powers I have invited all international organizations to take part in the process of observation of the forthcoming presidential elections in accordance with the democratic principles and values.

The Decision of the Supreme Court which was issued today, provided representatives of all Embassies and International Organizations with the possibility to observe the elections, and thus, confirmed our democratic commitment and removed the likelihood of encountering possible negative consequences of the previous decision.

Yours Sincerely,

/S/

Dr. Oiver Dulic
Speaker of the National Assembly

/End Text/

Comment

119. (SBU) The real race begins on January 21. Tadic entering this last sprint as an underdog may finally shake off voter apathy and get democrats to the polls. We understand that Tadic's campaign may take a turn and, without focusing on the bad, old past of Milosevic, will suggest the different futures that might result from Serbia's choice for president. Assuming for the sake of argument that many Socialists and New Serbia voters would support Nikolic over Tadic, the president will win only with support of democrats (liberal, or others) from outside his base, and, rightly or wrongly, the president is convinced he needs the support of Prime Minister Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia. We expect that he will get it, in the end, but at a price; continued slavery to the whims of Kostunica. End Comment.